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Bob Considine

A Footnote on

Here is a footnote to the biggest "leak" since the Johnstown Flood — the unauthorized unveiling by the New York Times of extended excerpts from a 2,500,000 word Pentagon report on how and why the U.S. became involved in Indochina and the moves three Presidents made that resulted in ultimate disenchantment.

The footnote is an interview President Johnson gave the late Frank Conniff, Washington-based Hearst columnist Marianne Means and this reporter in March, 1967, at the White House. Inasmuch as the Pentagon history ordered written that year by Defense Secretary Robert McNamara places much of the Vietnam onus on the Johnson administration, the following may be pertinent:

"I didn't start this," LBJ said of the war. "I inherited it. It was getting more difficult not long before the full responsibility fell on me. Right in this room when Kennedy called on Ike after his election in 1960 Ike told him that the big problem he was going to have as the new President would be in Southeast Asia.

"Just before Dallas, Kennedy told me that we were going to have to fight in South Vietnam, not just advise." He swung his eyes at us and there was challenge in them. "Now, is it going to be said of me that I let Kennedy down? Am I going to be remembered as the fellow who pulled out, who became as scared as a rabbit in the field?

"I sent ambassadors to 30 countries, tried everything," he said, frustration as well as anger welling in him. "They just don't want peace, those fellows, don't want to negotiate — now." LBJ lingered on "Now."

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"WE KEEP THE PRESSURE on them all the time," he went on. "Not too much, not too little. I read here and there that they still think they're winning, but every day we show them that they aren't winning, and eventually even they will realize it. We're killing them on the ground, day in and day out. The figures we released aren't estimates. We count every body we find. That isn't hard: They leave most of their dead and wounded. We're killing or wounding them at something like the rate of 17 to one. How long can they last at that rate?"

(The Pentagon report states LBJ had been told previously to that interview that the CIA had assured him that nothing would cause Hanoi to stop figliting or supplying the Viet Cong.)

Mr. Johnson was particularly incensed at this time, March of '67, by an article in Look magazine written by Eric Sevareid — a memoir on Adlai Stevenson's last days, made sadder, the CBS commentator and columnist wrote, because Stevenson's transmissions of peace offers had been rejected at the White House level.

"Do you think Adlai or anybody else could get a peace offer and I, the President, wouldn't hear about it?" He asked indignantly.

He looked around the room, solemnly, and said, "only 35 men have reached this office. I don't think any of them ever willfully set out to do something wrong." His eyes fastened on the soundproofed AP and UPI teletypes faintly chattering on the side of his office. "But go over there to those tickers and you can find at least six mean statements about me on the wires," he invited.

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LBJ HAD BEEN criticized shortly before this for a Chicago speech which referred to ". . . some Nervous Nellies and some who will become frustrated and bothered and break ranks under the strain and turn on their leaders, their own country, and their own fighting men."

He considered a much more important passage of the speech:

"As Commander in Chief, I am neither a Democrat nor a Republican. The men fighting in Vietnam are simply Americans. Our policy in Vietnam is a national policy. It springs from every lesson we have learned in this century . . .

"We have learned that failure to meet aggression means war, not peace. . . . if we fail in frustrating this aggression the war that would surely come to Asia would produce casualties in the hundreds of thousands — perhaps in the millions."

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Deceit Upon Deceit: A Shameful Record

The New York Times articles on a secret Pentagon study of the Vietnam war confirms a great deal that has been known, suspected or feared for many years by the American public.

In an action that should never have been initiated and should not have been given attention by any court, the federal government has halted at least temporarily the publication of the Vietnam articles. The injunction is a temporary one, but it cannot help but add suspicions to those already aroused in the minds of Americans. In this case, the public's right to know to just what extent it has been lied to and bamboozled is paramount.

The Times series contains many hitherto unpublished facts concerning the history of that war — but few surprises. The knowledge that the famous Tonkin Gulf incident of 1964 — which gave President Johnson a "foot in the door" toward major escalation of the war — was the result of U.S. provocation, made to provide an excuse for an already planned intensification of fighting, is no surprise.

But that knowledge, along with much other intelligence revealed in the massive study, does serve to provide a concrete and irrefutable basis for criticism of the Vietnam war — from its earliest beginnings during the Truman administration, to its present state under President Nixon.

Until now, opponents of administration action in Southeast Asia have had little other than logic, morality and rightness on their side. The facts to support their position lay in the hands of the administration, the Pentagon, the military intelligence agencies — the people who wished to prosecute the war. But the revelations of the Times series provide, as no previous news has done, factual arguments to prove the deceit which so many Americans have known so long, by seeming intuition.

The clear fact is that U.S. administrations have lied to the public in their statements about Vietnam, in their reported actions, the motives for those actions, the extent of American involvement and its historic timetable. Lie has been based upon lie to develop the deception under five U.S. presidents.

Perhaps the principal surprise in the Times series is the clarification of the roles of the Pentagon and the CIA in the shaping of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. It was the Pentagon which wrote the report which the Times has publicly revealed. The objectivity of the report — the bad light which it casts upon all concerned — demonstrates that the Pentagon was not deluded by the misinformation which was fed to the public.

It is likewise revealing that the CIA and many top military advisers rejected the widely publicized "domino theory" and opposed President Johnson's orders to bomb North Vietnam. The report indicates that the CIA, as early as late 1963, told the President that Viet Cong rebellion in South Vietnam was "indigenous" to that area, and to the ideals of the people there — that it was not the political inspiration of Hanoi or Peking. That the war was pursued in the north, and under the guise of protecting the remainder of Southeast Asia from Communist aggression, is ample evidence of presidential loss of faith with the public, and with appointed presidential advisers.

If Secretary Laird's Pentagon is to be believed, if the CIA is to be believed, if many military and political experts who have too long remained silent are to be believed, then little that happens in the Republic of South Vietnam constitutes any threat to U.S. — even Southeast Asian — security.

But a threat does exist where a series of presidents and administrations can involve a nation in a war which violates morality, legality, common sense and political wisdom. A threat exists where a government may perpetuate a 20-year lie to its people.

[redacted] knew about it.

WASHINGTON POST
17 JUN 1971

Humphrey Says He, LBJ Didn't Lie

By David S. Broder
Washington Post Staff Writer

Former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey last night defended himself and former President Lyndon B. Johnson against charges they had misrepresented American policy in Vietnam during and after the 1964 campaign.

Admitting that he was ignorant at the time of the secret documents that have been published from the Pentagon's history of American involvement, the Minnesota senator vigorously denied that the administration had decided on the "premeditated escalation" policies which he accused 1964 Republican nominee Barry Goldwater of favoring.

"I am not a liar" the 1964 vice presidential nominee said in an interview. "I would not go out and accuse Mr. Goldwater if I knew we had a policy" of escalation at the time.

Humphrey said that "I believed it" when Johnson promised in that campaign not to send American troops to fight an Asian war, "and I have reason to believe that he believed it too. I don't believe President Johnson had plans at the time to activate American ground forces."

Humphrey said that until he read the Pentagon papers published in The New York Times this week, he did not know of the covert American-backed attacks on North Vietnam in 1964 or of the reported administration "consensus" in September of that year to begin full-scale bombing of the North after the election.

But he said the picture of an administration determined to frustrate negotiations until the Communists had been dealt a heavy military blow "is not the way I remember it" when he became vice president in January, 1965.

"These papers portray President Johnson as wanting to wage an all-out military offensive," Humphrey said, "and that's just not true. I am a sensitive observer of the man, I saw him anguish over the war. I saw him try to limit the bombing, turn down the Joint Chiefs' manpower requests and turn down bombing Haiphong harbor . . . He wanted to end the war and get a negotiated peace."

Humphrey said that even after he became vice president he did not normally see the confidential papers that moved between Johnson and his top advisers on the White House staff, the Pentagon and the State Department.

But he cautioned against concluding that plans presented to the President — many of which have now been made public in the Pentagon history — represented the President's policy.

"There are a lot of memos that float around," he said. "The government is filled with people who shuffle papers and a lot who write papers . . . It doesn't mean the man at the top always agrees with those views."

Humphrey said that he had doubts about the propriety of publishing the documents, saying they "will do a great deal to damage confidence in government" and will "only aid and abet the doubt and cynicism and suspicion about government."

But he said that rather than let them stand without interpretation, a congressional investigation of the orgins of American involvement in Indochina should be undertaken. He suggested that, a congressional joint committee on national security be created to conduct it.

The 1968 Democratic presidential nominee indicated he had been particularly disturbed by an escalation "scenario" created in May of 1964 by Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy, which included a draft of what later became the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, through which Congress authorized Johnson to take any steps necessary to defend South Vietnam.

Recalling that he had been briefed at the White House about that resolution without ever hearing of the Bundy scenario or the covert American operations against North Vietnam, Humphrey said such knowledge "would have made a great deal of difference to me." But again he cautioned against the assumption that the President was acting in the terms outlined in the Bundy memorandum.

Humphrey said he was perfectly willing "to take my share of the responsibility" for the Johnson administration's policy decisions in Vietnam. "I had my share of the responsibility," he said, "but you can't play both sides of the street. You can't be part of an administration and not take your raps."

Humphrey said his own suggestions were usually given orally to the President and when, from time to time, he sent Johnson memos on Vietnam policy, "I don't think it was very helpful. I don't think the President thought his vice president needed to do that."

He declined to say what he had recommended, because "I'm not going to second-guess the President. I'm not going to try to make myself look good at his expense."

Asked what effect he thought the disclosures would have on his own chances for renomination by the Democrats in 1972, Humphrey replied: "I don't suppose they can do much more to me than was done before. I lived through the 1968 campaign, and the harassment of 1965 to 1968. I don't think I'm any worse now than I was then, and maybe a little better."

Humphrey said that in defending the administration, "I'm not trying to justify a thing. The lack of candor is regrettable."

But he cautioned against those who have concluded from the published Pentagon documents that Johnson and his associates deliberately tried to conceal or disguise their real intentions in Vietnam.

"I don't think you can make that judgment yet," he said. "I don't think the whole story is out."

Humphrey said he would not use the word "brainwashed" to describe the process, because "you got an awful lot of information about our decisions when those decision were made." And he added: "I don't think you've been lied to."

Were the American people told enough of the truth? he was asked. "How do I know," the senator replied. "I'm not Jesus. I'm not Solomon. I'm just Humphrey."

WASHINGTON POST
JUN 1971

Vietnam: The Public's Need to Know . . .

There are a number of things to be said about the McNamara Papers, now in a state of court-ordered suspension—things ceremonial and things substantive. We would begin with a tribute to Mr. McNamara for his initiative to arrange for the collection and preservation of these records documenting our Vietnam involvement, for the convenience of historians and scholars and future decision-makers. It was not exactly a selfish gesture: to the extent that the war will be judged as a calamitous mistake, and Mr. McNamara as a major contributor, he must have recognized the risk he ran of helping to indict himself. And he doubtless was not overjoyed to see it all surface so soon in The New York Times' brilliant and painstaking display —and, neither, in a certain unelevated sense, were we.

But never mind; those of us who believe that the reader, which is to say the public, always gains from the maximum possible comprehension of what the government is doing and how it all works (particularly when it works badly) can only applaud the Times' enterprise; it is hard for us to think of an argument for withholding such material once it was in hand. So we are also grateful to the Nixon administration for at least being good enough to allow this series to run for three days before deciding that the installments as yet unpublished somehow endangered national security in a way which the three installments already published apparently did not. Why the government moved on Tuesday, instead of, let us say, late Saturday night when the first edition became available, is, well, puzzling.

But there is plenty to chew on as it is and there are more than enough lessons to study and absorb. Taking nothing away from the Times, the story that unfolds is not new in its essence — the calculated misleading of the public, the purposeful manipulation of public opinion, the stunning discrepancies between public pronouncements and private plans — we had bits and pieces of all that before. But not in such incredibly damning form, not with such irrefutable documentation. That is what brings you up breathless: the plain command to the Secretaries of Defense and State and the head of CIA from McGeorge Bundy, in the President's name, to carry out decisions to expand and deepen our involvement in the war as rapidly as possible, while making every effort to project a very gradual evolution, with no change in policy; the careful concealment of clandestine intervention in Laos and North as well as South Vietnam in early 1964; the clear "consensus" of at least the main body of presidential advisers in September 1964 in favor of bombing the North even while President Johnson was publicly promising in campaign speeches *not* to "go North," not to send American boys [illegible] ought to fight for themselves.

That is what is so chilling: the contempt for public opinion; the ready recourse to the press as an instrument for misleading the public; the easy arrogance with which these men arrogated to themselves decisions which no government ought to take without the knowledge, let alone consent, of the people; the contempt for Congress as yet another inconvenience to be dealt with, when necessary, with blithe duplicity. This is Political Biz, you could say, but it doesn't make it any less sorry a performance.

And yet the deceit is only a part of it because a policy of calculated deception flows quite logically from the larger strategy of a limited war, fought for limited objectives, with limited means. And therein lies perhaps the most important lesson from the McNamara papers now available, for they tell us more explicitly than anything that has so far been said publicly how this strategy was supposed to work — and why, when it didn't work out rather quickly, it was doomed to fail.

It all began, the documents tell us, with a recognition in early 1964 that the South Vietnamese were too weak to bargain for a settlement. So the name of the game was to even up the odds, to redress the balance of force, to widen the war in the name of peace because only by widening the war could you create the conditions that would lead both sides to accept a settlement. This was the New War; you weren't going to win in the old conventional way: by a "graduated response," you were going to project the specter of an almost limitless application of American power on the ground and in the air, in hopes that the enemy, looking far ahead, would accept the hopelessness of it all, and negotiate long before you had reached the limit of the military measures you were prepared to take. That's where the deceit came in, for you couldn't really tell the American public, at least at the outset, everything you contemplated doing without stirring debate, and inflaming war fever and provoking dissent — without projecting to the enemy, in short, precisely the impression of doubtful resolve that you did not want to project. So instead we assembled huge stacks of chips and played them a few at a time in hopes that the North Vietnamese, instead of raising back, would simply call, by suing for peace.

Only it didn't work out that way because Hanoi kept raising back and in early 1968 the Johnson administration ran out of playable chips; there was the Tet offensive and the military demand for more troops and the prospect of economic controls and a run on the dollar and the antiwar movement and Lyndon Johnson had to check. The narcosis of padded progress reports could not dull the hard realities. The resilience and resourcefulness of the enemy had been terribly misread; the effectiveness [illegible]

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